

Communist University



2013

Agitprop

Part 5

Song, Dance, Drama and Poetry



Avanti Popolo



[Avanti Popolo](#), alla riscossa
Onward, people, to the revolution

Songs

Political songs in South Africa are a main part of the Agitprop of the country. Mass political singing is a South African characteristic.

At political rallies and conferences, and whenever the masses are gathered in one place, songs can be heard. New songs and old songs.

I would be unusual if a speaker on a platform was to call for a song, and the audience by unable to respond.

Often, a crowd will assert itself with songs that the platform may, or may not, welcome. The songs can provide a current of discourse that runs beside, and affects, the formal, verbal process of the gathering.

Both melodies and lyrics are composed and re-composed to express current meanings of the moment. Comrades compose and rehearse in groups. Together with dance, this mass

art form that can spread and take off with speed, with or without the benefit of electronic media, is a very powerful unifier of the South African masses and of their liberation movement.

All of the above can be written without fear of contradiction. But what becomes apparent, when doing so, is that there is hardly any literature or recorded audio material that bears witness to this giant phenomenon that touches millions and which proceeds from year to year and decade to decade.

There is the story of the martyr [Vuyisile Mini](#), who was known as a composer of songs. There is Enoch Sontonga, the composer of "[Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrika](#)", which is the national anthem of South Africa and at least three other countries, although in South Africa it has been diluted with parts of "[Die Stem](#)". These are known about, but the modern and regenerative life of political songs in the country is not as a rule written about in the mass media, or studied in the academy.

Efforts to promote "[The Internationale](#)", the US trade union anthem "Solidarity Forever", and others of that kind are not very successful here, mainly because these works come out of a tradition that is far less of a mass phenomenon than what we have here in South Africa. With the possible exception of the "Internationale", because of its ancient associations with the Paris Commune of 1871 (the first ever workers' state) and its consequent worldwide acceptance as the anthem of the communists, most of these songs lack resonance in South Africa, where the living culture of political song is far in advance of other places.

Is it necessary to discuss something like this? Yes, it is necessary. All of our study is to objectify our political world and to understand it in a rational and explicit way. It is not acceptable to remain with a situation where some things are reflected in academic and journalistic discourse, while other aspects of our political lives are allowed to pass away without commentary or permanent record of any kind.

In the absence of a readily-available discursive literature, the above will have to suffice for the stimulation of a discussion about political singing. We should bear in mind that this study of ours is breaking new ground in terms of commentary upon mass political song.

We would also want to appeal to anyone who has knowledge of any recordings of, or scholarly works about, political singing in South Africa, to let the CU know about them. It may be that there is a body of scholarship and critical commentary that we just have not discovered yet.

Choirs

Formal Choirs are characteristic of South Africa, although South Africans seem hardly to be aware of their comparative high position in the world in this wonderful art form. It is true that there are choral traditions in many countries but in South Africa, choirs are everywhere. Naturally, they sing religious songs for the most part, but not always, and there has always been revolutionary choral singing.



Umkhonto we Sizwe Toyi Toyi

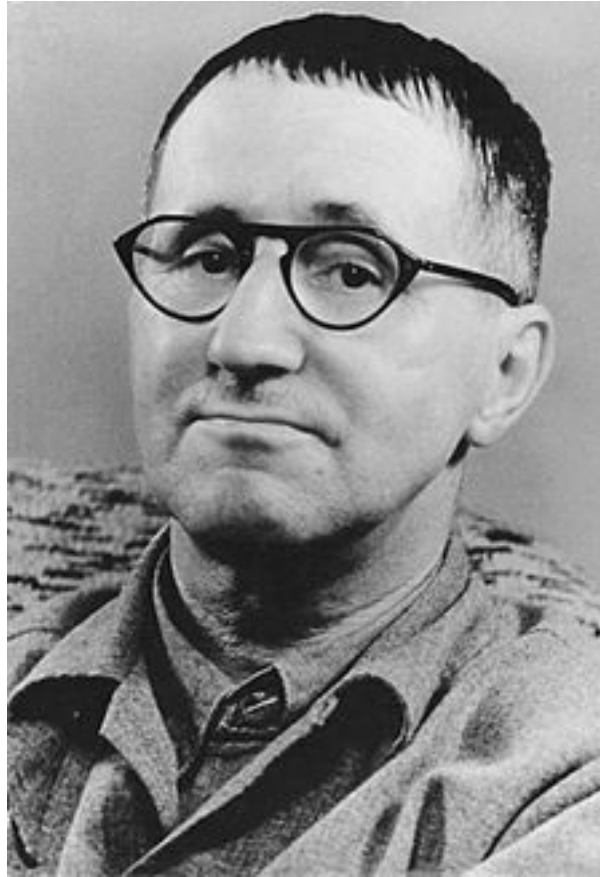
Dance

Use of dance as a means of Agitprop is a South African characteristic.

It is often said, for example, that South Africa is the only place where striking workers dance as a means of protest. Whether or not it is the only place, yet it is true that this happens in South Africa and that a strike without any “toyi-toying” is a rare thing in SA, such that the words “toyi-toyi” and “strike” are interchangeable in some South African contexts.

When demonstrators dance, they are marshalled and kept to a pace and kept tight in formation.

The effect altogether is to magnify the impact of any demonstration as compared to the strolling, loose crowd that is typical of European “marches”, which rely only on size for impact.



[Bertolt Brecht](#)

Drama and Poetry

Live drama and street theatre are always going to be part of any study of Agitprop.

But in South Africa, the actual tradition of political theatre that existed during the struggle against apartheid, and which was associated with the actor/playwright [Athol Fugard](#) in particular, and with the director [Barney Simon](#), is practically discontinued at the present time and for some years past, with the notable exception of the efforts of actor/director/playwright [John Kani](#).

Acting, directing, producing and all of the dramatic performing arts continue to be cultivated in relation to film and television. But live theatre as a mass phenomenon is hardly present in South African streets and towns. Insofar as live drama does exist, it is usually in theatres that are behind walls in Casino (gambling) complexes, while the theatres that formerly prospered are often standing dark and neglected.

The great exponent of political drama, apart from William Shakespeare, was the German communist Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956).

The effect of television has been to commodify and to render unfruitful the impact of drama on the lives of the people. It becomes the wallpaper of our lives.

All of the above applies as well to stand-up comedy, variety and cabaret, for the time being, and to Ballet and Classical Music, including Opera, which flourish in socialist countries, but in South Africa are elite pursuits.

In the apartheid years there was a performing group called [Amandla Cultural Ensemble](#), also known as the Amandla Group. It was high quality and it made a great impact. The Amandla Group were recorded as musicians, and there is at least one clip of them on YouTube.

Apart from the casino theatres, drama and live performance art are probably only being practised in schools, colleges and universities in South Africa. The extent to which drama and the other performance arts are taught in South Africa, we do not know, but we would expect that the graduates would mainly be headed for the television production studio and related industries, in any case.

Poetry

Poetry is something that continues to have a life. People are still writing poetry and performing it, live. Comrades sometimes publish their poems on the Communist University. Poetry lives, and is ready to have its day again.

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